

PLOTTING  
THE  
SHORT  
STORY

BY

CULPEPER CHUNN



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## Plotting the Short Story



# Plotting The Short Story

*By*  
CULPEPER CHUNN

A Practical Exposition of Germ-Plots, What They Are and Where to Find Them: the Structure and Development of the Plot; and the Relation of the Plot to the Story.

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I

## GERM-PLOTS

What They Are and Where  
to Find Them



## CHAPTER I

### GERM-PLOTS: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

A comprehensive system of plot development, and an adequate supply of material to draw from, are almost indispensable to the writer who turns out a large number of stories each year, and to the occasional scribbler who has little knowledge of plot form and structure it is of even greater value. Years of experience as a writer, literary critic and student of the short story have brought out these facts: The writer who is "long" on writing is generally "short" on ideas, and an inadequate knowledge of the plot and its development causes more aspiring authors to fail than any other one thing.

Most beginners seem to have the idea that the writing game is a very easy game to play, as easy as ping-pong, for instance. A few of them have acquired a fair education; others, not so fortunate, are equipped with nothing but a gnawing desire to write, and on first appearances it seems to them that it should prove to be a very simple matter to weave their ideas into readable stories. Some of them have a vague

idea of what a plot is, but they know nothing about BALANCE, INCITING MOTIVES, CRUCIAL SITUATIONS, CLIMAXES, etc., and care less. When they read in their favorite magazine a cameo-like story by some master writer, they do not realize that the author may have labored for days over that story, rearranging words, eliminating paragraphs and even whole pages from the original draft, and reconstructing the plot after he has torn it to pieces half-a-dozen times. The words flow so smoothly, the characters stand out so clearly, the plot is so simple—how easy it must be! But these writers are soon disillusioned when the rejection slips begin to roll in on them with the regularity of well-oiled clockwork. Not until they have served a long apprenticeship do they learn that authorship is as much of a profession as surgery is and that, as in all other pursuits, it is simply a matter of the survival of the fittest.

No writer can hope to achieve real success in the writing field unless he is well-grounded in the fundamentals of plot construction, nor can he avoid an atmosphere of SAMENESS in his stories and give them the stamp of cleverness and originality unless he constantly adds to his store of plot material. "The

plot's the thing," and the writer who relies solely upon inspiration to furnish him with suitable plots for his stories cannot begin to compete with his more practical brother craftsman who stimulates his imagination with tid-bits from real life, as it were, and builds the foundations for his stories with the same care and exactitude that a stone mason would employ in building the foundation and framework of a house. Inspiration is, without a doubt, a very great thing, although personally I know very little about it, never having had time to sit down and wait for it to visit me. But it is a fickle creature at best, and requires as much attention as a teething baby. Even those rare exceptions among the writing fraternity who possess the divine spark need a solid base from which to start on their flights into the realms of imagery. It is not difficult to build an occasional plot. With one girl and one man, or two girls and one man, say, for a starting point, almost any writer who has touched a few of life's high spots can build a plot of some sort, but he cannot repeat the process over and over again with any great degree of success for the reason that he must attack each new story from a different angle, and when he relies entirely

upon his own limited experience and his imagination, he soon finds this a very difficult thing to do. For this reason experienced writers always keep on hand a varied assortment of story-ideas, original and otherwise, to be used as starting points when they make new voyages into the uncharted seas of fiction. These story-ideas are called germ-plots.

A germ-plot is an idea which may be broadened out and used as a foundation upon which to build a short story—a spark, to shift the figure, that starts a conflagration in the writer's brain and makes him an object to be pitied until he sits down before his typewriter and pounds out a story to make us sit up half the night to read. Germ-plots lurk on street corners, in dark allies, in dingy restaurants, in ballrooms, on the faces of men—and women, in the lisp of a child, in the newspapers, in magazine advertisements, in funny sayings, in love letters, in jail, in insane asylums—on board the train, ocean liner, zeppelin! The germ-plot, in short, is any original or acquired idea, unusual situation, striking title, curious advertisement, funny character, queer dream, clever story—in fact, anything that contains an element of mystery, adventure, humor, fantasy, love, etc., and which has a twist



to it, is ideal material for germ-plots and therefore legitimate plunder for the writer.

To make my meaning clearer, let me give two or three concrete illustrations. One day several years ago, for instance, I saw something fall from the second story window of an apartment house and at first thought that it was a man. Then a gust of wind kindly came along and opened it up and I saw that it was a pair of purple pajamas. A moment later a young lady in scanty attire rushed out of the house, snatched up the brilliant garment and hurried back into the house again. When I got home I promptly developed the idea into a story called "The Purple Pajamas" — and sold it.

On another occasion I saw on a bulletin board a circular advertising for an escaped convict. The line "\$500 Reward, Alive or Dead," caught my eye and started a train of thought thundering through my mind. At first glance the idea may seem trite; nevertheless, it developed into a story that I called "The Man From Virginia" — and sold.

Again. One day I read a newspaper account about a man who had a twin brother who looked so much like him that his wife, in a fit of jealous rage, shot her brother-in-law, in the belief

that she was letting daylight through her husband! I nursed the idea for a couple of days, then wrote "His Brother's Keeper" and placed it without difficulty.

Every writer should have a blank book in which to jot down his germ-plots as he uncovers them, which are later to be neatly typed off on uniform sheets of paper and filed away for future use. Anything that seems suggestive, whether it appears to offer material for immediate use or not, should find a home in the Plot Book, where it will be found waiting with a cheerful smile on its face, as it were, some dark day when inspiration has taken to her heels and ideas seem to be about as plentiful as snow on the Fourth of July.

To give the reader an idea of the kind of material that should be stored away, and the manner in which it is done, let us pick at random a few items from one of my many plot books:

Saw man on street today who had a scar on his face resembling a question mark. (What an idea for a story!)

Overheard a woman say: "When a man loves he will dare anything."  
(Suggests original title "The Man Who Dared.")

Saw splotch of red on a white flower in the front yard of a house today. Looked like blood.

Tramp standing before the window of a fashionable restaurant gazing hungrily at the food being served within.

The newspapers are a very mine of ideas for the writer, the news items, sporting page, headings and advertisements (especially the "personal column") all being a common stamping ground for the germ-plot. A pair of scissors should always be kept at hand and used freely in dissecting out the interesting items one runs across when reading the papers. The shorter items and headings can then be typed off and filed away, and the longer articles pasted in a scrap book kept especially for this purpose.

Consider the following headings, items and advertisements, which were actually clipped from the daily papers:

### HEADINGS:

Saves Governor; Wins Pardon.

Sells Self for Life for a Pair of Shoes.

Baby Girl Left on Doorstep.

Caught Boarder Kissing His Wife.

Bride of One Day Mysteriously Murdered.

Slayer Weeps Over Victim's Body.

## NEWS ITEMS:

(Condensed)

An unidentified white girl is found dead in a public park. Marks on the girl's throat lead police to believe she was murdered. Her handkerchief was marked with a number — 47 (laundry mark?)

The mysterious murderer known as "Doctor X" was hanged at the jail this morning. Even at the last he refused to tell his real name and it is probable his true identity will never be known.

Two women fight in courts for possession of same baby. Both women claim to be the infant's mother. Baby was left on the doorstep of a foundling asylum a year ago; now both women appear to claim it as their own.

A carrier pigeon with a broken wing fell to the ground in front of the post office and was captured by a messenger boy. A message in code was carried in a small metal cylinder tied to one leg; on the other leg was a metal band marked as follows: "HM-19373-Y."

## ADVERTISEMENTS:

(From "Personal Columns")

R. L. P. Saw your message in yesterday's paper. It came too late. You must try and forget. Brown Eyes.

Men for desperate adventure wanted. No questions asked: none expected.

Want to communicate with a young lady matrimonially inclined. Must be a blond and willing to accompany me to South Africa.

Jack. Come home. Sarah is dying. All is forgiven. The black box has been found. Marie.

Where it is not practicable to preserve long accounts of murder trials, and sensational robberies, jot down the clues that have enabled the detectives to run the criminals to earth. Note the following, all of which were gleaned from the columns of the newspapers, and two of which at least have been used as the central ideas around which stories have been written:

Broken sword-cane.

Hairs from murderer's head clutched in victim's fingers.

Laundry mark on handkerchief.

Imprint of murderer's teeth in apple.

Scent of rare perfume near scene of crime.

Finger prints on dagger.

A writer should never read a magazine, novel or any other literary effort unless he has his notebook and pencil near at hand, for it is often the case that we will come across a catchy phrase or an odd situation as set forth by some brilliant brother of our fraternity which will give us an idea for a story — if we can remember it.

Take, for instance, the following suggestive lines gathered for the most part from stories in current magazines:

"Jack leaped to his feet and gazed around him wildly. The clock struck thirteen."

"He sobbed out his soul in her arms."

"I will wear a read rose on the lapel of my coat so you will recognize me."

"I have given you my life, my love, my wealth, myself. Can I give you more?" (Suggests original title "The Woman Who Gave Her All.")

"His foot was as twisted as his smile."

"The moon was red, as if a film of blood covered it." (Suggests title "When the Moon Shone Red.")

When a striking title occurs to you, write it down whether you think it will ever be of use to you or not. Some of the greatest short stories ever written were inspired by titles. Anyway, the day may come when you will develop a plot for which you can find no suitable name. If you have a good supply of titles on hand, you will doubtless be able to find the very thing you are looking for to embellish the child of your brain.

In one of my notebooks I find, among others, the following suggestive titles:

The Devil's Prayer.

The Man Who Sneered.

The Serpent's Fang.

The Scarlet Halo.

The Thirteenth Hour.

The Mummy's Hand.

The Kiss of Hate.

The Girl in Black.

Curious or striking names, too, will often prove suggestive and give us an idea that may be the means of making some joyous editor part with a substantial check. Names such as the following, for instance, are well worth preserving:

Abner Death.  
Mag Scarlet.  
Father Boniface.  
Arizona Pete.  
"Iky" (nickname for girl).  
Alias The Hawk.  
Pap Lee  
Mlle. Fay.

I often find it easier to build a plot around an odd character than around an odd situation, and have a separate book for Types and Characters. Types of interesting classes of people, followed by brief explanatory notes, should be entered in the book, as, for example:

### CRIMINALS:

**INSTINCTIVE:** Usually those who commit crimes for the sheer love of the excitement that enters into every criminal's life. Clever criminals of this type popular with readers. **ARSENE LUPIN** and the **LONE WOLF** good examples.

**OCCASIONAL:** Usually average human beings of normal mentality driven to crime by necessity, temptation, or to shield or save themselves or others in unusual circumstances over which they have no control.

## DETECTIVES:

**MASTER MIND:** Criminologists who solve mysteries by deduction or logic. Men of real genius in their particular line. Eccentric, curious mannerisms, etc., but with many lovable qualities. Popular with readers. **SHERLOCK HOLMES** and the "Thinking Machine" good examples.

**REFORMED CONVICT:** Usually a young man of some education with a wide knowledge of crime and criminals. This type of detective is always popular when cleverly drawn. **CLEEK** is a good modern example.

While I have given but two examples in each of the foregoing classifications, it should be remembered that there are many other types of criminals and detectives, such as (criminals) **ACCIDENTAL**, **UNWILLING**, **ORIENTAL**, **LOW-BROW** OR **THUG**, etc., and (detectives) **SCIENTIFIC**, **CRIME SPECIALIST**, **SECRET SERVICE AGENT**, **POLICE**, **CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL**, etc., all of which are worthy of a place in the Plot Book.

In another part of the book the interesting characters one meets with should be made note of. When the characters are fictional — creations of other writers — this fact should be noted, because such characters can, of course, only be used to suggest other characters of a similar type. For example,



## CRIMINALS:

DR. FU-MANCHU. Chinaman, cruel, crafty. Sinister motives. Deeply learned in the sciences. Highly developed mental powers. Sibilant voice. Green, filmy eyes. Cunning, more than a match for the police. Popular with readers. (The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu, Sax Rohmer.)

"THE GHOST." Cracksman. Girl. Beautiful. Early history obscure. Brand on right soulder. Disguises herself as man. Evening clothes, high silk hat, mustache, etc. Clever, daring. Matches wits with celebrated criminologist who is in love with her. (Original.)

## OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS:

DOCTOR: About 30 years of age. Long and lanky. Red-headed. Fiery temper. Heart of gold. Genial and companionable AT TIMES. Something of a genius. County practitioner. Careless about dress. Mannerisms. Wrapped up in profession. Delays wedding to perform operation. (Red Pepper Burns, Grace Richmond.)

MOUNTAINEER: Rattlesnake Bill: Old, toothless, bronzed, wrinkled. Ex-feudist and moonshiner. Goes bare-footed and hatless. Wears dilapidated blue jean pants and hickory shirt. Lives in log cabin. Kindly and lovable. Biggest liar in state. Children all love him. (Original.)

I could write on in the same vein indefinitely and fill up page after page with matter of a similar character, but I desire only to point out a few of the

sources from which the writer may gather plot material and give him an idea of the kind of material that should be preserved, and I believe the examples I have given will prove sufficient for my purpose.

It is the sacred duty of every ambitious writer to acquire the note-book habit. No writer can realize the opportunities he has lost in the past, or hope to get anywhere in the future, until he does. A Plot Book can be started with a single stray thought and once the habit has been acquired it will become almost second nature to jot down useful bits of information which in time will grow into a mine of inspiration for the writer when his original-thought machine refuses to function.

## II

# STRUCTURE OF THE PLOT



## CHAPTER II

### STRUCTURE OF THE PLOT

Before we can hope successfully to develop the germ-plots we have so carefully gathered into well-balanced working plots upon which to build our stories, it is of course essential that we have a working knowledge of plot-form and structure. A great many writers, especially beginners, are unable to round out their plots sufficiently to give their stories the proper balance, simply because they are not familiar with the technicalities of plot construction, and the author who attempts to write a story around a poorly formed plot is almost sure to find himself with an unsalable manuscript on his hands.

There are a great many writers, of course, especially among those who have "arrived," who do not find it necessary to commit their plots to paper, but who work them out in their minds before they begin their stories, or build them up detail by detail after their stories are begun. To these writers plot **BALANCE** and **MOVEMENT** have become instinctive, and they find that their words flow easier and that their imaginations are more active when they begin their stories with only a half-formed plot in

mind or, indeed, with no plot at all, their theory being, that the creative mental powers are given fuller play if permitted to invent while the story itself is in the process of development than if forced to form a fixed plot-plan before the story has begun to materialize. But in the main these writers rely upon word-grouping (style) more than upon plot to put their stories "over," and even the best of those who adopt this policy occasionally come to grief, for it is not an easy matter to fashion a plot and beautifully formed word groups at one and the same time. Such a plan, if consistently followed, usually proves fatal to the beginner. A technically-correct plot upon which to build one's story is as essential to success as a thorough understanding of the language of one's country; and the only way for the novice to make sure his plots are free from technical flaws is for him to work them out on paper, according to fixed rules, with the same care that he would use in solving a knotty mathematical problem. Once the simple rules of plot construction become fixed in his mind, and he gets the FEEL of the plot, the writer can begin a story with nothing to build on but a vague idea and a burning desire with some hope of work-

ing out a well-proportioned plot after the story is well under way, but until he does master these rules he courts disaster each time he begins a story unless he has worked out his plot in advance.

We venture to say, without fear of successful contradiction, that no really great short story was ever written the plot of which was not clearly outlined in the writer's mind before he began to write. Most of those writers who have exposed their methods of writing to public view have dwelt upon the importance of the plot, and many of them have explained the mechanical processes they used to build up the plots that made their stories famous. Poe, the father of the American short story, worked out the plots for his stories to a mathematical nicety, and even the framework or background of those of his stories which may be said to be devoid of plot received as much care and consideration as his more involved stories. Poe even went so far as to apply this principle to his poetry, and it may prove of interest to know that "The Raven," the most famous of his poems, was, according to his own words, the result of a process of mechanics and was not, as many people believe, dashed off in the white heat of inspiration. And so it is, and ever has been

since the birth of the short story proper, with most of the great writers.

Authors who have the leisure to do so, should therefore make an exhaustive study of the plot, calling to their aid several authoritative text books in order to get the teacher's point of view, and analyzing the stories they read in the current magazines so they can get a line on the plot as it is handled by successful writers, and at the same time become acquainted with the editorial preferences of the different periodicals. The system of plot building outlined in the following pages is aimed more particularly at the writer who has little time for reading and study, who writes only when he can snatch a few minutes from other labors that absorb most of his time, and who has to take his instruction in story-writing in concentrated form. The very simplicity of this system should recommend it to this class of writers especially. The system is well past the experimental stage, having been used by a number of writers with unvarying success since it was first originated by the present writer some years ago, and as it is based on the accepted principles of plot construction and offers a quick and never-failing plan for applying those principles to a practical end, we believe it will



prove an inspiration to those writers, beginner as well as "old timer," who will give it careful study and a thorough try-out.

Before taking up the actual development of plots it is, as we remarked above, necessary for us to familiarize ourselves with the different parts of the plot, so we can build the foundations for our stories on firm ground, else, like the man who built his house on a sand bank, we may find the situation slipping away from us.

Let us therefore consider the following brief:

## OUTLINE FOR PLOT DEVELOPMENT

### General Scheme

#### BALANCE:

- Keynote.
- Crucial situation.
- Complications.
- Deliberation.
- Solution.

#### MOVEMENT:

##### 1. DIRECT.

Action moves tersely forward with incidents acting as index to crucial situation.

## 2. INDIRECT.

Introducing secondary complications, crises, etc., before the climax.  
Reflex of complications.

### Development

#### OPENING:

1. INACTION (objective).
  - (a) Introduction.
  - (b) Purely descriptive.
2. ACTION.
  - (a) Revealing inciting motive.
  - (b) Theme.
  - (c) Characters.
  - (d) Setting.
  - (e) Combinations of the above.
3. INDIRECT ACTION (anticipatory).
  - (a) Suggesting inciting motive.
  - (b) Revealing theme.
  - (c) Characters.
  - (d) Setting.
  - (e) Combinations of the above.

#### BODY:

1. Incident of plot development.
2. First moment of suspense.
3. Cause of crisis.
4. Crisis.
5. Second moment of suspense.
6. Crucial situation.
7. Cause of climax.
8. Climax.

## CLOSING:

1. Direct denouement and conclusion.
2. Interpretation, if any.
3. Aftermath, if any.

It will be seen that the plot is divided into three main divisions — the opening, the body, and the closing. That the foregoing outline might be complete we have given the several different openings, that of *INACTION* included, though this at its best is but a poor opening and is seldom used. The crisp, well-formed plot should open either by suggesting or by revealing the inciting motive of the story. Or we may go a step farther and begin the plot with the first incident of plot development (a psychological moment, we might say), which, it will be observed, falls within the second of the three divisions. Indeed, this latter opening is usually considered the best of the three openings we have mentioned, because in these hurried days we do not begin a story, we start off in the middle of it, and not infrequently commence where the antiquated *TALE* used to end. The modern reader likes to plunge directly into the action of a story, and editors, knowing this, do not as a rule look kindly upon a story with a leisurely opening.

The body, of course, is the most impor-

tant part of the plot, as it serves as a frame to hold the loose threads of our idea together. The body of a model plot should be clean-cut and well-defined. Padding with unnecessary complications tends to make a plot bulky and flat unless skillfully handled. In the snappy plot, following the first incident of plot development, the writer should work smoothly, unswervingly and logically through the first moment of suspense, the cause of crisis, the crisis, and then, through the second moment of suspense, the crucial situation, and the cause of the climax, swing tersely to a climax (unless there are to be complications). Hold to the main thread of the story-idea when possible and do not leave loose strands scattered about to lead the reader astray. When complications seem desirable or necessary, try to equalize them so the body of the plot will not lose its proper proportion.

The closing of the plot is usually restricted to the direct denouement and conclusion, for it is always best to drop to a swift end when we have sprung our climax. Never leave the plot-problem unsolved. Readers do not like to wade through a long story and then be left in doubt as to what the writer was driving at. "The Lady, or the Tiger?" type of

story went out of fashion years ago, and trick stories that leave the reader guessing are tabooed by editors. End a plot decisively, in such a way that explanations are unnecessary after the climax has been reached. Interpretation of a plot, which really belongs to the short story proper and has little to do with plot building, is always awkward and therefore to be avoided when practicable.

It should be borne in mind that each part of a plot has a direct bearing on the other parts and plays an important part in giving a plot **BALANCE** and **PROPORTION**. The building of a plot in some respects is not dissimilar to the solving of a jig-saw puzzle; each separate piece has its place and the different parts have to be fitted together with the greatest exactitude in order to obtain a complete and perfect whole. The beginner, therefore, would do well to make himself thoroughly familiar with the simple plot before experimenting with its more involved relation. Nor should this work any hardship on the writer, for the simple plot offers as many possibilities for literary accomplishment as the plot abounding with complications. Practically all of the short story classics have simple plots. Take, for instance, the stories of the three masters: de Maupas-

sant, Poe, and O. Henry. With few exceptions these stories are written around the most simple plots, and who is there to say that this fact detracts from the absorbing interest of these masterpieces?

The complicated plot is not only more difficult to build than the simple plot but the inexperienced writer usually finds it a very unruly creature when he begins the process of elaborating it into a story. The introduction of many complications in a plot diverts the writer from his main course, and instead of driving steadily forward to his climax he is side-tracked from time to time and finds himself floundering in a maze of loosely-connected ideas having only an indirect bearing on the plot, all of which, nevertheless, have to be drawn together into a cohesive and supple whole.

There is always a tendency on the part of the beginner to unduly stress certain parts of even the most simple plot, and this, if carried to the extreme, is sure to play havoc with not only the balance but the movement of the story, for a story cannot move forward smoothly and confidently like a well oiled engine (as a story should move forward) if the plot is not well proportioned. This

tendency to make a plot top-heavy or lopsided is, of course, chiefly due to the fact that the novice, having no approved rules to guide him, is forced to grope ahead blindly; but even the writer who has a knowledge of plot anatomy, and who should therefore know better, occasionally makes the blunder of taking liberties with proportion, with the result that he creates not technically correct plots but monstrosities. Above all things the novice should cultivate a sense of proportion, and adhere to the established rules of plot building, for it is the relative size and arrangement of the different parts that give a plot unity and sustained interest, and in these two elements is found the essence of successful plot making.

Strive, too, for strength. By **STRENGTH** we mean not only a consistent and well made plot, but one fashioned out of a red-blooded idea. The writer cannot hope to build strong plots from ideas that lack vitality. Flimsy and transparent ideas afford the writer small opportunity to work up suspense during the story, and catch the reader off his guard with a smashing climax. A plot that fails to rouse the reader's interest at the very beginning and then make his interest grow up to the very end, falls

far short of its purpose and the reader who starts a story based on such a plot is apt to throw it down in disgust, the best part of it unread. The reader wants to be interested and he likes to be surprised. He enjoys matching his wits with the writer's and if he is not outwitted his contempt for the poor author is profound. You can never bore a reader with a story full of surprise twists, but you can disappoint him and even cause him pain if your plot does not lead to an unexpected climax.

And do not forget originality! By originality we do not necessarily mean that the writer should try to unearth ideas that have never been used for plots before. Considering the fact that there are said to be only thirty-six dramatic situations, and that virtually all short stories owe their lives either directly or indirectly to one or more of these situations, this would be found a very difficult thing to do indeed. But he should try to twist the old ideas around into unique forms and make combinations of single ideas new to readers. There is never a dearth of story-ideas for the writer who is himself a reader (and is there any writer who is not?). But these ideas have to be refined and recast in new molds, and it is a wise author who



gives due thought and care to the process. A story with a trite or overworked plot stands little chance of finding a permanent home between the covers of a magazine, unless its fond parent is something of a genius at juggling with the king's English, and even a beautiful style of writing will not often "land" a story with a weak plot. Writers whose names are household words not infrequently have their stories rejected because of faulty plots, for these days editors demand something more than reputation. The magazines are always on the outlook for stories with strong, original plots, and it is the chief aim in the down-trodden author's life to give them what they want. Strive always to create, therefore: never imitate.

THE OUTLINE FOR PLOT DEVELOPMENT contains the whole theory of plot construction, and a grasp on the principles found therein is necessary to an intelligent understanding of the system of plot development we are to elucidate in the next chapter. We have not deemed it necessary to take up each part of the plot and dwell upon it at length, believing that the writer would be more benefited by seeing the Outline in actual use than by having it fed to him in the abstract. "A pound of fact is worth a

ton of theory," some latter-day Socrates has said; and, as Mazie, our waiter, once remarked, he said a forkful. Besides, the Outline speaks in a very large measure for itself, and the writer who will take the trouble to fix its salient points in his mind will find a new interest and pleasure in the building of plots.

For "placing" the germ-plot, or, more properly speaking, for identifying the most suitable field for a story-idea's growth and expansion, observe the condensed outline of a chart that follows, from which the writer may gain an idea for the preparation of a completer one for his own use:

## CHART FOR PLOT CONSTRUCTION

### **ACTION:**

Detective, mystery, problem, fantastic, emotional, war, adventure, business, etc.

### **TIME:**

Present, past or future — perhaps with specific period, as during a Peace celebration.

### **SETTING:**

City, country, town, island, the sea, with specific locality.

**CHARACTERS:**

Number: One girl and one man, etc. Occupations: Plumber, cowboy, actress, etc. Other limiting details. The characters depend, of course, a good deal on the Action, Time, Setting, Atmosphere and Mood.

**ATMOSPHERE:**

Humorous, joyful, sad, gruesome, religious, etc.

**MOOD:**

Good, evil, love, hate, fright, revenge, etc.

The more elaborately this chart is carried out the better. It has nothing to do with the actual structure of the plot, of course, but it plays an important part in our system of plot development, and even the casual writer will find it of inestimable value when developing plot-germs, and may often glean an original idea from the chart itself which will start a train of thought thundering along in the right direction.



### III

## PLOT DEVELOPMENT

### Simple Plots



## CHAPTER III

### PLOT DEVELOPMENT

#### Simple Plots

To develop our germ-idea into a full-fledged plot or skeleton upon which to build our story, we must first analyze it carefully, use a little shrewd deduction, supply parts that are lacking, and then write the scattered parts into a lucid and logical whole. Patience, a careful survey of a story-idea's many possibilities, and a methodical summing up of the conclusions drawn from our analysis will usually bring about the desired result.

If our mood is right and free rein is given to the imagination, it is seldom difficult to analyze a basic idea, provided it is striking or original enough to stir our sluggish minds to action; but it is sometimes hard to choose from the different fields into which our speculations are wont to lead us. The writer can only rely upon his best judgment in picking a way through the maze of possibilities that opens up before him and be guided by his own individual taste.

In explaining our manner of analytic procedure, we will confine ourselves at first to simple story-ideas, so the writer

can get a firm grasp on the methods employed before he sets out to explore the labyrinths of the complicated plot. By simple story-ideas we mean embryo plots that follow the line of least resistance in unfolding. From these ideas are evolved the plots that form the basis of most short stories less than three thousand words in length. The simple plot is all that the name implies. It is usually direct in movement, and has no complications to harass the writer and distract the reader. Opening with either the inciting motive or the first incident of plot development, it marches forward over a straight road until it reaches its goal, the climax.

With a copy of the Chart for Plot Construction before us, let us now select a germ-plot and see exactly what we can do with it. We select the following typical plot-germ from one of our note books:

“Bride and groom leave home in dead of night, bride without wraps, groom without hat or coat. They leave a red light burning at one of the front windows. They never return.”

What does this suggest? When we glance at the Chart there instantly



leaps into mind the following: Action — mystery; Setting — city; Atmosphere — gruesome; Mood — hate. We already have our principal characters — at least, enough for the present. A title also suggests itself: "The Red Flame."

We now wish to analyze this idea, and, reading it over again, we find that these questions stare out at us:

1. Why did the bride and groom leave home in the dead of night without their wraps?
2. Why did they never return?
3. Why did they leave a RED light burning at one of the front windows?
4. Where did they go?
5. (a) Who saw them leave? (b) Who first saw the red light? (c) Who first entered the house? (d) Who did he or she find?
6. What would be a logical outcome of the affair?

After considering the matter carefully, we might reply:

1. Because they feared some person or some THING.
2. Same answer.
3. Probably as a signal.

4. To a foreign port, or to their death.
5. (a) Immaterial. (b) Same answer. (c) The man — or woman — for whom the signal was intended. (d) Death.
6. The logical conclusion we draw from the foregoing is that when the man — or woman — who entered the house did not reappear within a reasonable length of time, the police batter down the door and find the entrant lying on the floor dead.

This being the case, we naturally want to know:

1. Why was the man — if it was a man — killed? and
2. The manner in which he met his death.

Reading over the analysis again, we would say:

1. Because of the fear the bride and groom had for him, and as they were absent,
2. They must have left some trap for him to walk into.

Now, before we can draw up a working plot based on this analysis, it will be

necessary for us to select from the material offered the four pivots around which a plot revolves — the opening, the crisis, the crucial situation, and the climax. The inciting motive is found in the red light the bride and groom left burning at the window; the crisis would seem to be the appearance of the police on the field of action; the crucial situation when the man — or woman — enters the house; and the climax when the police batter down the door.

Having settled upon these important points, we find it an easy matter to fill in between them, and at once draw up a brief working plot, using the OUTLINE FOR PLOT DEVELOPMENT as our guide, as follows:

### THE RED FLAME

(Inciting motive) A red light is seen burning in the window of a house and causes some comment throughout the neighborhood. (Incident of plot development) Man declares he saw the bride and groom who had been occupying the house leave the night before without their wraps, as if in great haste. (First moment of suspense) Stranger, who had been hanging around the neighborhood for the past several days,

walks up to house, peers through the window, and walks rapidly away again. (Cause of crisis) Police are notified. (Crisis) They cannot enter the house as the doors and windows are locked and barred. (Second moment of suspense) One policeman goes for an ax with which to batter down the door, the other around to the back of the house. (Crucial situation) Stranger returns, walks rapidly up to the house, inserts key in lock, enters house, locks and bars door after him. (Cause of climax) A pistol shot is heard in the house and the red light goes out. (Climax) Police batter down the door. (Denouement and conclusion) Find the man lying on the floor with a bullet wound in the center of his forehead, and the following letter written in blood grasped in his hand:

“We saw you pass the house this evening and know that you have found us at last. You enter here thinking you will find the ?, but instead you find — Death. For as you pick up this letter from the table you will release a string connected to the trigger of the gun pointed at your head, and as

you die, The Red Flame dies with you.”

Seems simple enough, does it not? And it is simple, once we have a grasp on the methods to be employed. It is simply a matter of analysis and of elimination. Of course the writer has to draw freely upon his imagination, for it takes something more than determination to make a success at the writing game. It is the technicalities of invention, generally, that bother the literary aspirant.

Let us now build up another simple plot — simple, but one that seems at first glance a little more difficult than the one we have just constructed. Suppose we select as our central idea a newspaper heading: “Girl Stabs Self, in Wedding Gown.” This gives us a single crisp idea from which we are to build our plot.

Now, having let the idea percolate through our minds, we naturally want to know:

1. Where did the girl stab herself?
2. Why did she stab herself?
3. When did she stab herself?
4. What sort of weapon did she use?

Offhand we would say:

1. (a) A home, (b) in a cab, (c) or before the altar of a church during the wedding ceremony.
2. Because she had just found out something in her intended husband's past life that promised to wreck her happiness, or (b) because she feared he would find out something in **HER** past life which she wanted to conceal, or (c) because she was temporarily insane.
3. On her wedding day.
4. (a) Stiletto, (b) hat pin or (c) some instrument she found in the church.

Selecting the most dramatic situations from the foregoing, we find that the girl stabbed herself with a dagger before the altar because she feared the groom was about to discover some dark deed in her past life.

So far so good, but

1. What did she expect the groom to find out?
2. Why did she go as far as the church altar before carrying out her terrible design?

Her motive must have been a great one; therefore we are led to believe that

1. Perhaps she was a Magdalene, or was already married, and
2. She feared that her husband (as the marriage-angle seems the safer of the two possibilities) was about to reveal himself.

But, if this was the case,

1. Why, if she already had a husband, was she about to be married again?
2. Why did she not tell the groom her secret instead of trying to kill herself? and,
3. Why did she stab herself before the altar?

Doubtless because

1. She had believed her husband was dead; yet
2. Hearing that he was still living she had, while not believing the rumor, prepared herself for emergencies.
3. Because she saw her husband in the congregation assembled for the wedding.

What, then, would be a logical conclusion to such a situation? Well, as the plot is a little "heavy" and we want to wind it up with the happy ending, we would say that after the bride-elect stabs herself, the groom, who had seen a man in the congregation leap to his feet in an excited manner and rush from the church just before the bride-to-be plunged the stiletto into her breast, follows the man down the street, sees him killed by a street car or in some other plausible manner, and returns to the church to find his future wife still living.

So far everything is satisfactory. But how are we going to open our working plot? If we open with the inciting motive, it will be necessary for us to do considerable preliminary skirmishing before we can get into the action of the story we are planning to write. In this case, therefore, it would seem to be advisable to skip the inciting motive and open the plot with the first incident of plot development which, without a doubt, is found in bride-elect's arrival at the church. This brings us to the crisis, which would seem to be when the girl pulls the dagger from the folds of her dress. The crucial situation is found in the act of attempted self-destruction;



and the climax, of course, is when the girl's lover sees the husband killed.

Based on these conclusions, we now draw up the following foundation for our story:

(Incident of plot development) Bride-elect enters church on her father's arm and walks towards the altar where the groom is waiting. (First moment of suspense) Bride suddenly turns pale and reels back. (Cause of crisis) A man in the congregation leaps to his feet and cries out. (Crisis) Girl pulls stiletto from the bosom of her dress. (Second moment of suspense) Man rushes from the church with the cry "That woman is my wife!" (Crucial situation) Girl plunges dagger into her breast and falls back into the groom's arms. (Third moment of suspense) Groom swears vengeance and places the girl in her father's arms. (Cause of climax) Benedict-to-be rushes from the church in pursuit of husband. (Climax) Sees him run over by street car and killed. (Denouement and conclusion) Returns to find future wife, who is only slightly injured, reclining on a lounge, reading a telegram from a detective agency: "Positive

proof that your husband died in South America two years ago."

There we have the plot, and by adding the telegram (probably based on mistaken identity) we not only relieve the plot of some of its "heaviness" but wind it up with an unexpected twist that gives the reader much food for thought.

For our next analysis, we will select a newspaper heading offering us a broader field than the one we have just developed. The following, which seems to offer unusual possibilities, was actually clipped from a daily paper: "Convict Wins V. C.; Marries Red Cross Nurse."

After a glance at our Chart, we would "place" this plot-germ as follows: Action — war; Time — during world war; Setting — this will depend upon developments; Characters — we will start off with the one man and the girl; Atmosphere — doubtful; Mood — love.

Now, first of all we want to know something about this convict with such an unique record. Therefore, our first task is to find out:

1. Who was he?
2. Was he a soldier?
3. If so, how could a convict enlist in the army?

4. How did he win the Victoria Cross?

It would seem very likely that

1. He was a notorious highwayman or cracksman.
2. Yes.
3. Under an assumed name.
4. Well, suppose we say he saved his regiment after it had been trapped by the enemy.

Very well; but, if this man was a desperado, it naturally follows that he must possess all of a desperado's unlovely characteristics. Therefore,

1. How could he change his personality to such an extent that he could win the love of a refined girl?
2. Where did he meet this Red Cross nurse? and where did their romance develop?
3. How did she learn of his past (for of course she must know his true history)?

A rather dramatic situation occurs to us. We would say that

1. Because of a slight pressure on his brain, caused by an injury received in action, his memory

up to that instant is blotted out, and because of this his whole personality has changed. (It is a fact that this has actually happened many times.)

2. In the hospital where she nursed him through his illness.
3. Suppose we say he revealed his past to her while delirious, following an operation to restore his memory by relieving the pressure on his brain.

All right. Now we want to know:

1. Was the operation successful?
2. If so, what happens?
3. What would be a logical conclusion to the affair?

And in reply:

1. It would be easier for us to say "no," but more interesting for us to say "yes." Therefore,
2. After the operation the man reveals his true character to the girl whom he fails to recognize, and she, nearly beside herself with grief, decides upon a daring course of action to save the man for herself and FROM himself. When he goes to sleep she places her finger over the

spot on his head where the pressure has been relieved and presses it gently (the surgeon having warned her not to let anything touch this spot). And lo,

3. When he regains consciousness it is found that the operation has been a failure, and the soldier is the same happy, cheerful, refined lover the girl has learned to love.

This analysis is fairly broad, and as the material offered seems to call for a plot of a more leisurely type than the one we last evolved, it might be well for us to open our working plot with the inciting motive. This, it appears to us, is found in the surgeon's decision to operate on the afflicted soldier. Very good. The crisis? The operation itself. The crucial situation? When the soldier regains consciousness in the character that was his before his mind became affected. The climax, of course, is when the girl renews the pressure of that part of the unfortunate man's brain upon which the surgeon operated.

We now draw up a working plot:

(Inciting motive) Soldier is informed by his sweetheart-nurse

that he is to be operated on within the hour. (First incident of plot development) They discuss the matter and its many possibilities. (First moment of suspense) Surgeon says operation may fail. (Second incident of plot development) Questions soldier, bringing to light his unique record back to the time of his injury. (Cause of crisis) He is wheeled to operating room. (Crisis) Operation, the nurse assisting. (Second moment of suspense) He is brought back to his room, still under the influence of ether. (Crucial situation) He regains consciousness in his true character and, not knowing the girl, upbraids her in harsh language, and tells her he is a famous highwayman, of whom she has heard. (Cause of climax) The girl decides there is but one thing for her to do: **THE OPERATION MUST BE A FAILURE.** (Climax) Girl touches "danger" spot on sleeping soldier's head. (Denouement and conclusion) He regains consciousness and, the operation failing because of the pressure the girl applied to his head, proves to be the tender lover she has always known.

There are great possibilities to the above plot, especially if the writer is equipped to deal authoritatively with the dual-personality angle; but the author who knows little about the mechanism of the human mind, would do well to side-step the psychological lead and follow some other line of reasoning in working up the plot. He would find the experiment not only interesting but instructive, and if he has his proper share of creative ability, he should be able to work out a plot which, when compared with the one we have just unfolded, would show no signs of having sprung from the same basic idea.

## PLOT DEVELOPMENT (CONCLUDED)

## Complicated Plots

The complicated plot in its development calls for a fertile imagination and a natural aptitude for mental gymnastics. It usually proves to be the despair of the writer deficient in creative ability, and even the more imaginative author sometimes finds himself hopelessly entangled in its meshes. The simple plot, as we have shown, never swerves from a straight line; the complicated plot, on the other hand, may lead us off into divers by-paths, each ending in a cul-de-sac, from which the writer has to blaze a way back to the main idea. The difference between the two types of plots is traceable to the basic idea. Methods of development are the same in both cases. The thing the writer has most to fear in unfolding a complicated plot is the danger of becoming lost in one or more of the many side-issues that make this type of plot what it is, and until he becomes familiar with its intricacies, he should move slowly and never let the major idea remain long out of sight. Complicated plots form the basis of most mystery and adventure stories, and in fact, the majority of other stories of



more than three thousand words in length.

For our first analysis, let us take the following sentence, or rather, part of a sentence, extracted from a recent book-length portrayal of life in the West Virginia mountains: "Melissa took the blood-oath. . . . and swore to shoot Blaze on sight." A promising plot nucleus, because it is atmospheric.

We now glance at the Chart for Plot Construction and choose the most suitable field for the growth of this germ-plot, which is, we believe, as follows: Action — adventure; Time — present; Setting — mountains; Characters — uncertain; Atmosphere — doubtful; Mood — doubtful, but possibly hate or revenge.

As we want our characters to be original, we at once change the girl's name to Dawn, and the man's name to Jerry, and begin our probe by asking:

1. What is a blood-oath?
2. Who is Jerry?
3. Why should Dawn desire his death?

Having consulted one of our mountaineer friends in regard to the first question, we promptly reply:

1. A vendetta sworn by a feudist against another feudist of a hostile clan.

2. Dawn's lover.
3. He may have betrayed her trust, or perhaps, duelled with and killed one of her kinsmen.

Excellent! It appears that our principal characters are feudists and are identified with different factions. As we like plenty of action in our plots, this sounds promising. But to proceed with our inquiry:

1. Did Jerry really kill Dawn's kinsman (the duel appearing the most promising of the two possibilities)?
2. If not, why has the finger of guilt been pointed at him?

After due reflection, we would say:

1. No. (The slain man is Dawn's kinsman, let us say her cousin, and if our story is to have the "happy ending," it would never do for the girl's lover to be the murderer.)
2. Dawn's cousin, whom we will call Boyd for the sake of convenience, has been killed by some unknown person, and relatives have accused Jerry, whom they bitterly hate because of his relations with their kinswoman, of the murder.

All 'right. Now we want to know:

1. How and when did Dawn first here the rumor that Jerry is guilty of the crime?
2. How did it react on her?

In reply, let us say:

1. When the dying man is brought to her cabin in the mountains.
2. As it would on any normal girl. She believes her lover to be innocent, and, having heard her kinsmen swear to avenge Boyd's death, leaps upon her horse to fly to Jerry to give him warning.

A brave and noble act, and quite in keeping with the character of the average mountain girl; but we must not forget her kinsmen who are of the same fibre that she is, and quite as determined to slay Jerry as she is to save him.

Therefore:

1. Is she pursued?
2. Does she reach Jerry in time?
3. Does he protest his innocence?
4. And, if the girl is followed by her kinsmen, does Jerry fight it out with them or "take to the timbers?"

After weighing the possibilities of each question, we would say:

1. Yes.

2. Yes.
3. He does not have time to do so, and leaves the girl in doubt.
4. He escapes.

Very well. Now it is necessary for us to know:

1. What becomes of Jerry?
2. Is he pursued and captured?
3. What develops?

And in reply:

1. He goes into hiding in the mountains.
2. He is pursued by the feudists but eludes them.
3. Suppose we say he hid in the mountains until nightfall and then went to the cabin of one of his kinsmen for food. He then learns, let us say, that Dawn has become convinced that he killed Boyd, after hearing two of her relatives falsely swear that they witnessed the deed, and, regretting the part she played in his — Jerry's — escape, has taken the blood-oath and sworn to avenge her favorite cousin's death by shooting Jerry on sight. All of which, it should be said, is very characteristic of the untamed mountain girl.

Here we have a pretty situation and one that requires delicate handling. But, before proceeding, we should ascertain:

1. What effect did this news have on Jerry?
2. What was the result of its reaction on him?

As Jerry is a mountaineer it is very likely that:

1. He took the news calmly, and,
2. Again sought refuge in the solitudes of the mountains until he could decide upon his future course of action.

This, of course, makes it necessary for us to know:

1. What did Jerry decide to do? and,
2. What, in the meantime, has become of his pursuers?

Suppose we say:

1. Dawn finds her lover before he reaches any decision.
2. They have lost or abandoned Jerry's trail.

Good. Dawn, bent upon avenging her cousin's death, has now run Jerry to earth, and without a doubt is preparing to shoot him down. But she must never be allowed to kill the man she loves. This would be a tragedy

that would ruin our chances of giving the plot a happy ending. But Dawn has shown herself to be the kind of girl no ordinary event could keep from her purpose. How, then, are we going to convince her of Jerry's innocence before she has the chance to open up with her Winchester and make a sieve out of his body? It is not likely that she would believe anything he might say in his own defence. That is not a woman's way. Therefore:

1. What circumstance or set of circumstances can we invent to gain the unfortunate lover an hour's respite?
2. In the circumstances we evolve, what action does the girl take?
3. What would be a logical conclusion to the unhappy situation?

Let us give our imaginations a chance, always keeping in mind the climax which we are now swiftly approaching. Suppose we say that:

1. Jerry's father (dyed-in-the-wool feudist) has been thrown from his horse and mortally injured and has asked to see Jerry before he dies.
2. Dawn (very much of a woman at heart) has promised the old

feudist that she will bring Jerry to tell him good-bye before he dies, if she can find him.

3. The girl hears Jerry's father, on his death-bed, confess to his son to having killed Boyd in self-defence.

All of which is quite satisfactory. We have unearthed a ripping climax and are now ready to build our plot. We will therefore read over our analysis again and search out the inciting motive. This, without a doubt, is found in the murder of Boyd. We now look around for the crisis, and find two — the first being when Dawn flees into the night to warn Jerry of his danger, and the second, when Jerry is told that his sweetheart has sworn to kill him. The crucial situation, of course, is when Jerry and the girl stand face to face after she has tracked him down; and the climax, when Dawn overhears the death-bed confession of Jerry's father.

We now have our bearings, and by drawing freely from the facts disclosed by our analysis, draw up, without much difficulty, the following working plot:

(Inciting motive) Wounded man is brought to Dawn's cabin by kinsmen who found him dying by the

roadside. (First incident of plot development) Boyd dies in spite of all efforts to save him. (First moment of suspense) Dawn asks for information relative to the shooting. (Second incident of plot development) Clansmen declare Boyd was murdered by Jerry (Cause of first crisis) Feudists make preparation to hunt down Jerry. (First crisis) Dawn leaps upon her horse and, pursued by her kinsmen, begins a mad race down the mountain-side to warn her lover of his danger. (Second moment of suspense) Finds him, warns him, and beseeches him to declare his innocence before they separate. (Third incident of plot development) Jerry, not having time to comply with her request because of the approach of her kinsmen, hastily kisses her, and touches only the high spots as he takes to the woods. (Cause of second crisis) Goes to kinsman's cabin. (Second crisis) He learns that Dawn has become convinced of his guilt and has sworn to "shoot him on sight." (Fourth incident of plot development) Jerry again goes into hiding. (Crucial situation) He is confronted by Dawn, who has



tracked him to his hiding-place. (Fifth incident of plot development) Dawn tells him his father is dying, and that she is going to grant him — Jerry — an hour's respite so he can tell the old man farewell. (Cause of climax) At the point of her rifle Dawn takes him over the mountain to his father's cabin. (Climax) The girl overhears the father on his death-bed confess to the slaying of Boyd. (Denouement and conclusion) The lovers again find happiness in each others arms.

There we have our plot, nor did we find the building of it very difficult. This plot, which could be written into a very exciting short story by a capable writer, is a good example of the moderate type of complicated plot.

We will now try something more complicated. The following is a condensed news item clipped from one of the daily papers:

“A man is found dead in a restaurant with a beer stein in his hand and a scrap of paper lying by his body with the following words scribbled on it: ‘Vile chi tradisce il segreti del confidente.’ ”

Instantly there flashes into our mind

a corking title, "THE MUG OF DEATH." With this as a "lead" we glance at our Chart and "place" our germ-plot as follows: Action — detective; Time — present; Setting — city; Characters — doubtful; Mood — revenge.

Now we plunge bravely into the maze of possibilities that opens up before us:

1. How was the man killed? (a) murdered? (b) suicide? (c) natural death?
2. If he was murdered, how was it done?
3. Did his body show marks of violence?
4. Who was responsible for his death? (This, of course, depending on whether or not he was murdered.)
5. Who was he?
6. What was in the stein?
7. What does "Vile chi tradisce il segreti del confidente" mean?
8. Who found the body and notified the police?

The following answers occur to us instantly:

1. He was murdered.
2. Poison.
3. No.
4. Unknown.

5. Not identified.
6. Nothing.
7. "He is a coward who betrays a confidential secret."
8. The proprietor of the restaurant.

Before going further it might be wise to inquire:

1. What was the motive for the crime?
2. Whom do the police suspect?

And in reply:

1. The legend found by the dead man's side suggests revenge.
2. A waiter in the restaurant, though they have no evidence upon which to arrest him.

Now, no weapons were found near the dead man, nor are there any marks of violence on his body. We have suggested that he was poisoned, but the inside of the stein was dry and therefore could have held no liquid. Some deadly gas, then. But how could gas be confined in a beer stein? Easily, by fastening down the top with a thin rim of white wax, boring a small hole in the bottom of the stein, forcing in the gas and plugging up the hole again. When the top was opened (which could be easily accomplished by a slight pressure on the edge) the victim would get a good whiff of the gas and fall back dead, while

the superfluous gas would escape and leave no trace of how the crime was committed.

This naturally leads us to the following questions:

1. What kind of gas was it?
2. Who was responsible for the diabolical plan?

Offhand we would say:

1. Carbon monoxide, which is one of the deadliest gases we have.
2. It must have been an "inside" job, and was doubtless "pulled off" by a waiter or the proprietor of the restaurant, who was a member of a Black Hand society. This last is suggested by the words on the scrap of paper found by the dead man's side, which are Italian.

Do the police solve this mystery? Suppose we say they do not, and that before they have completed their investigations a second man is found dead in the restaurant under exactly the same circumstances as the first victim. This gives us an opportunity to tie up the plot with a few more complications. Very well. Now, as the police have failed to get to the bottom of the affair, why not have a celebrated private detec-

tive undertake to solve the mystery? If this is done, we of course want to know:

1. Did he solve the crime?
2. If so, how?

In reply, we would say:

1. Of course. (Fictional detectives always do!)
2. Well, suppose we say he first found out HOW the men were murdered, but fails to identify the murderer — although he suspects the proprietor of the restaurant whom he believes to be a famous criminal. Therefore, he plans out his course of action as follows: He will tell the proprietor confidentially that he knows who the murderer is, then order a stein of beer and see what will happen. After making the necessary arrangements with the police, therefore, he secures a duplicate of the steins used in the restaurant, conceals it in his overcoat pocket, enters the restaurant, becomes confidential with the waiter, and tells him in a voice loud enough to be heard by the proprietor, whom he sees standing in the kitchen door, that he is investigating the murders and

that he has found out who the murderer is; then he orders beer (feeling sure, of course, that if the proprietor is the guilty man he will try to get rid of him — the detective — at once).

Well, assuming that all of this took place:

1. What happens to the detective?
2. What happens in the restaurant after the attempted murder, if there is one?

Suppose we say that:

1. The detective secures the stein which the PROPRIETOR (and not the waiter) brings him, and replaces it with the one in his pocket; then he falls over on the table as if dead or dying and is carried away in an ambulance.
2. The WAITER is arrested by the police and charged with the crimes.

The following questions now occur to us:

1. How did the detective make sure of his man?
2. What is a logical conclusion?

And the following answers:

1. (a) He finds that the stein the proprietor brought him con-

tains carbon monoxide gas; (b) By comparing the proprietor's finger-prints (which he had secured by smearing transparent wax on a menu card) with prints in the Police Department's files and finding that he is a famous criminal who is being sought by the police of a dozen cities.

2. The arrest of the man, who confesses, and the exoneration of the waiter.

From this mass of material we now select the inciting motive, which is the discovery of the first of the two murdered men in the restaurant. A further search reveals two crises: the first, when the police declare the two dead men are evidently the victims of the same murderer or murderers, and the second, when the detective feigns death. The crucial situation is found in the arrest of the waiter, and the climax, in the arrest of the proprietor. Therefore, after carefully reviewing our analysis, we draw up a terse working plot, as follows:

## THE MUG OF DEATH

(Inciting motive). Man is found dead at a table in a small Italian

wineshop (First incident of plot development) Police declare man has evidently been murdered. (Second incident of plot development) Declare the "Vile chi tradisce il segreti del confidente" is the motto of a Black Hand society. (First moment of suspense) Police investigate but fail to find clue. (Cause of first crisis) Another man is found dead in the restaurant. (First crisis) Police declare that, because of the horrible expression on the man's face, they believe he died by the same hand and in the same manner as the first victim. (Third incident of plot development) Private detective undertakes to solve the mystery. (Fourth incident of plot development) Discovers how the men were murdered. (Fifth incident of plot development). Decides to trap the proprietor, whom he suspects, by giving him sufficient cause to wish his — the detective's — death, and an opportunity to try to murder him. (Sixth incident of plot development) Enters restaurant. (Cause of second crisis) Tells waiter in a loud voice he knows who the murderer is, and orders beer, which is brought him



by the PROPRIETOR, who, after depositing the stein on the table, quickly leaves. (Second crisis) Detective, after securing the stein, falls over on the table as if dead. (Seventh incident of plot development) Police arrive, declare the detective is dead, and remove his body. (Crucial situation) WAITER is arrested by the police, who still cling to their theory that he is the guilty man, and charged with the crimes. (Cause of climax) Detective returns to restaurant. (Climax) Denounces proprietor and arrests him for the murders. (Denouement and conclusion) Proprietor, believing the detective to be dead, in his fright breaks down, confesses that he was commissioned by a Black Hand society to commit the murders, and exonerates the waiter.

In this plot we have the complicated plot at its best — or worst, as the writer prefers, for even the most ambitious author would have a hard time making it more involved than it is. As an exposition of the technic of complicated plot building, therefore, the novice should find it worthy of study.

We have now covered the whole field

of short-story plot development, and nothing remains but for the writer to experiment with plots of his own. Enthusiasm is the chief requisite in plot making, and method in analytic procedure the next. Once the author has a grasp on the methods employed in plot-construction, the development of germ-ideas into technically correct working plots will not be difficult.

IV

RELATION OF  
THE PLOT  
TO THE STORY

## CHAPTER IV

### RELATION OF THE PLOT TO THE STORY

The plot is the story-idea boiled down to the very bone, or, in other words, the synopsis of the story as we have evolved it in our minds and as we hope to see it materialize when we put our pens to paper to give it definite and immortal form. It has been said, and truly, that the plot bears the same relation to the story that the bony system bears to the human body.

The writer who follows our method and commits his plots to paper, may at first view the result a little dubiously. The working plot is so short, so concise, that its importance is apt to be overlooked unless one has an exact understanding of the part it plays in story-writing. On first appearance, indeed, a working plot may seem to have been created for no OTHER purpose in the world than to shackle the writer's pen and hold him down to a definite word-length. A three-thousand word story from a two-hundred word plot! Possible, of course; but what is the great idea? thinks the novice. Why waste time carving out a series of threadbare ideas when the story itself is begging to be written? These questions are soon

answered when the author begins the not always easy task of writing his story. Only by experience will he learn to appreciate what it means to have a definite route mapped out for his pen to travel over when he begins to write. Experience is a hard teacher, and in the writing game it has taught us that writing a short story without a working plot to lend us material as well as moral support, is a very difficult task indeed — like eating tripe the chef forgot to cook, for instance.

Needless to say, the working plot is not designed to cramp the author's style of writing or limit the scope of his ideas. Far from it. The function of the working plot is to keep the writer's stream of words flowing along in the right direction and make the ideas those words seek to express cohesive. Without a working plot, an unwritten story is an unexplored wilderness of hazy ideas, and it is the duty of the working plot to blaze a way through that wilderness and keep the writer from wandering around in circles after he enters its confines.

Compared to the story itself, the plot of even the longest story is very brief indeed, but it is elastic and subject to different degrees of expansion. The

word-length of a story to be written around a given plot depends entirely upon the author. Some writers have a diffusive style of writing, others are very sparing of their words; and an author is sure to adhere to his own particular style when he begins the process of elaborating a plot into a story. Give two writers the same plot and the chances are they will produce stories varying many hundreds of words in length.

Although we have at this time no intention of entering the sacred precincts of story-writing, except in its relation to the plot, the word-length of stories falls, we believe, well within our sphere of consideration, and, as the subject is an important one, it might be well to comment further upon it.

The modern short story calls for speed and snap. We have made this remark before, but, if one is to judge by the number of spineless manuscripts that swell the average editor's daily mail, it will bear repetition many times. The story must be placed before the reader with trip-hammer strokes. Readers who seek mental relaxation in short stories are usually busy people who read in much the same manner that they eat — "quick-lunch" style. They have not the time to wade through pages of

rambling descriptive matter or absorb weighty paragraphs of philosophic reflection. They refuse to be instructed; they want to be amused, and like their stories served up piping hot, as it were.

In writing the short story, therefore, the author should be succinct, but never, of course, to the point of sacrificing clearness. If his style of writing is diffusive, he should either try to cultivate a more direct and pointed style or turn to one of the literary forms offering a wider range for expression than the short story. With some exceptions, of course, short stories by novelists are apt to bore the reader to the point of distraction. The reason is that most novelists have a diffusive style of writing, and verbiage is out of place in short story writing. The beginner should not ignore this fact. It is one of the secrets of successful short-story authorship that has cost many a writer dearly to learn. "Brevity is the life of the short story," O. Henry said, and he knew whereof he spoke.

The short story should not be confused with the novelette. At the very outside, the short story is limited to eight thousand words, while the novelette may run up to twenty-five or thirty thousand

words. If the first draft of a story runs over the prescribed number of words, as it often will, the writer should steel his heart and wade in with the pruning-shears — or, rather, pencil. Most experienced authors revise their stories several times before they submit them to magazines, and consider that they have done a good day's work when they succeed in cutting a five-thousand word story, say, down to three thousand words or less. Revising a manuscript is a heart-rending task until the writer learns to look at his work from an impersonal and critical standpoint. It is hard to rip out beautifully formed sentences and paragraphs one has labored and sweated over, but at times very necessary; and the writer may expect no mercy from the unfortunate editors he inflicts with his manuscripts until he learns to weigh word values accurately and impartially. There are, of course, a few magazines that publish nine and ten-thousand word stories which they are pleased to term **SHORT**, but an analysis of these stories will show that most of them are either novelettes or very verbose short stories which only the exalted names of the authors succeeded in "putting over."

It will be seen, therefore, that while the working plot itself places no restric-



tion on the word-length of a story, the writer should always endeavor to keep himself within the established bounds: nor should he ever leave the word-length of a story to chance. The author should study the plot and come to some decision in regard to the matter before the story is begun. This calls for good judgment. Each part of the plot must be weighed separately, because the word-lengths of the different parts vary. It is simply a matter of values that can be learned only by experience. The most finely proportioned plot can be made into a very lopsided story by a careless writer. Proportion in story-writing, be it said, is as essential as it is in plot building.

In trying to determine the proper word-length of a story to be written, the author should first size up the plot as a whole and decide what is, in his opinion, the least number of words it will take for him to write it into an interesting and convincing story. He should then try to determine the proportionate value of each part of the plot and estimate the number of words it will take to give it expression. If his judgment is frequently in error, let him not be dismayed. Even the trained writer cannot always **SENSE** the proportionate values of the

different parts of a plot before he begins to write, but when he gets the story in rough draft he is able to see the plot in perspective, so to speak, and can then judge the importance of each part accurately. This applies to the beginner as well as the old-timer. Which means that the writer must expect to revise, and revise, and revise. Then, after he has done his best, he can only commit his story to the mails and leave the rest to fate — and the editors.

In casting about for a story to illustrate the relation of the plot to the story, two considerations have guided us in making a selection; first, the space-limits of our little book, and second, our desire to select a story that would clearly illustrate the point we wish to make. The story we have chosen is tersely told and the plot is very simple; it is therefore, we believe, well suited to our purpose. The story was first published in the New York SUN several years ago, and is reprinted here by permission of the editors of that paper.

The plot for this story was worked out by the methods described in the preceding chapters. The germ-plot from which it was developed was a one-line heading: "Man Steals To Keep Wife From Starving." We have not deemed

it necessary to give here our analysis of this basic idea, as the process for developing a plot-germ into a working plot has already been fully explained; but we have introduced a copy of the plot we evolved from the idea in order that the writer might follow us step by step over the course of its elaboration into a short story.

The writer should make a study of this working plot and either memorize it or refer to it from time to time during his perusal of the story that we have written around it. We make this suggestion because we are anxious for the literary aspirant to see exactly how each separate part of the plot was built up in the story, and how the several sections were joined together. Only in this way can he hope to arrive at a fair estimate of the value of each part of the plot and gauge the relative importance of the word groups connecting the different sections; and he must be able to do this if he desires to understand the part each section plays in giving the story **UNITY** and **PROPORTION**.

Later on the novice would do well to write a story of his own around the plot and compare it with the version that appears below. If the result is satisfactory, he can then begin the building

of new plots with confidence. The story as we have written it contains approximately one thousand words. The writer should strive to keep his version of the story within this word-limit, and then see if he can, in his own opinion, improve upon it by increasing the word-length to sixteen or eighteen hundred words. If convenient, he should then get some disinterested literary expert to read the several versions and comment upon them, for criticism, when it is sincere and constructive, is one of the young writers most valuable assets. Even the most hardened free-lance welcomes it because it fattens his bank-account, and this, be it known, he considers the sweetest and most beautiful thing in the world.

### WORKING PLOT

(First incident of plot development) A man stages a highway robbery in order to procure money to buy food and medicine for his ill wife. (First moment of suspense) He holds up a pedestrian. (Cause of Crisis) With the money he relieved his victim of, he buys food and hurries home. (Crisis) He finds his wife dead. (Second incident of plot development) Believing that

God deprived him of his wife to punish him for the sin he committed, he resolves to wash the sin from his soul by reimbursing the man he robbed. (Second moment of suspense) Having, after many hardships, accumulated sufficient money to do this, he sets out to find the victim of the hold-up. (Crucial situation) His untiring efforts are at last rewarded and he locates the man for whom he has been searching. (Cause of Climax) He steps forward to make amends. (Climax) The man proves to be a detective and places our erring hero under arrest. (Denouement and conclusion) The detective tells him the money he stole was counterfeit.

There is one very important point in the foregoing plot to which we desire to direct the writer's attention before he takes up the story that follows. We have reference to the **OPENING**. It will at once be perceived that the inciting motive of this plot is the necessity that drives the man to crime. But as our story was to be very short, we wanted to jump at once into the action of it, and avoided opening the plot with the inciting motive, which would have called for at least one introductory paragraph, by

starting off with the first incident of plot development and explaining in the very middle of it what the story was all about. And this, as we have already remarked, is always a good plan to follow when the story-idea is flexible enough to permit of it.

## GOD'S WILL

### FIRST INCIDENT OF PLOT DEVELOPMENT.

Joshua waited, crouched behind the clump of shrubs, until the man was directly opposite him. Even then his courage almost failed him; but he suddenly remembered the wife who lay in the cold, bare room at home, dying for the want of proper food to nourish her poor emaciated body, and without further hesitation sprang out on the sidewalk and thrust his unloaded revolver in the man's face.

### FIRST MOMENT OF SUSPENSE.

"Hands up," he said huskily.

The man stopped, laughed, and elevated his hands.

"A hold-up?" he asked genially.

Joshua nodded.

### DESCRIPTIVE: THE ROBBERY.

"I am sorry to — to inconvenience you," he stammered, as he slipped

his hand in the man's pocket and drew forth a roll of bills. "But — but my wife — I will only take a little."

"Oh, help yourself," said the other, looking at Joshua curiously. "A new hand at the game, eh?" he added.

"My first offense."

"Well, let it be your last," said the man dryly. "Your hand is too unsteady for this kind of work."

Joshua selected a hundred dollar bill from the roll of greenbacks and thrust the rest back into the man's pocket.

"Thank you," he said wearily, "and goodnight."

#### ANTICIPATORY: SUGGESTING A REFLEX OF DEVELOPMENTS.

"Au revoir," said the man with a queer laugh, "but NOT GOODNIGHT."

#### CAUSE OF CRISIS.

As he turned the corner and disappeared in the gloom, Joshua threw his useless revolver from him and made his way rapidly down the street, the hundred dollar bill clutched tightly between his numb fingers. At the corner grocery he paused long enough to purchase a

plentiful supply of dainties for Mary, and then hurried on through the cold streets to her bedside.

**CRISIS. EXPLANATORY: SHOWING HOW THE CRISIS REACTED ON THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTER.**

When he reached home his wife was dead.

"It is God's will," he whispered as he knelt by the bedside. "This is my punishment for the great wrong I have done this night. But I will right myself in the eyes of God and Mary. This, too, is God's will, and God's will be done."

**DESCRIPTIVE: AFTERMATH OF CRISIS.**

On the following day he buried what remained of the woman he loved, using the rest of the hundred dollars to give her a decent burial. After the funeral he did not return to his home. He felt that he could never again enter the room where he had knelt on the bare floor by the side of his wife through that long night of anguish. Mary was dead now; home was a thing of the past.

**SECOND INCIDENT OF PLOT DEVELOPMENT.**

So he turned his face toward the city and started out in search of



work. For he now had but one purpose in life, and that was to earn one hundred dollars by the sweat of his brow to reimburse the man he had robbed. For this was the Great Sin, he thought, that he must wash from his soul before he was ready to stand in the presence of his God and Mary.

**DESCRIPTIVE: PAVING THE WAY TO THE SECOND MOMENT OF SUSPENSE.**

Throughout the winter he toiled at what odd jobs he could pick up, for work was scarce and his unkempt appearance barred him from many doors that might otherwise have been opened to him. But he found work of a kind, and though he was but poorly paid, he thanked God for each copper he dropped into the dirty tobacco bag he carried pinned under his shirt, smiling bravely the while at the hunger that often pinched his cheeks and the cold gusts of wind that whistled through his threadbare clothes. For in thought he found much of his food, and the eyes of Mary, which ever smiled down upon him, gave him warmth.

**SECOND MOMENT OF SUSPENSE.**

At last arrived the great day

when he had accumulated one hundred dollars, and he set himself the task of finding the man he had wronged. He did not know exactly how to go about it; but he set forth trustingly, confident that his reward would come to him in due time.

**DESCRIPTIVE: SHOWING THE DIFFICULTIES JOSHUA ENCOUNTERED IN THE SECOND PHASE OF HIS TASK.**

Day after day he patrolled the streets scanning the faces of the passing throng. His unkempt figure soon became familiar in alley and on boulevard alike, and as he limped by on his tireless way many a man and woman gazed into his pinched face and wondered at the expression they found stamped thereon.

**DESCRIPTIVE: LEADING UP TO THE CRUCIAL SITUATION.**

The days passed and winter merged into spring, and still Joshua marched on toward his goal. The bleak days and nights had used him hardly; his clothes were rags; his shoes hung to his feet by shreds; his cheeks were hollow; his eyes glazed; but his determination was as firm as on the day he had started out on his quest, and if he at times faltered

as he limped about the town, it was because of weakness of the body and not from unstability of purpose.

#### CRUCIAL SITUATION.

And then one day he found The Man. The instant Joshua saw him as he came out of a little cigar store, he knew that his quest was ended. For he could never forget the face of the man he had wronged; it had been stamped on his brain by the weight of anguish.

#### CAUSE OF CLIMAX.

For an instant he was so overcome by joy that he could not move or speak; then he stepped quickly forward and touched The Man on his arm.

"One moment, please," he said huskily.

The Man stopped and looked at him sharply.

"Well?"

Joshua cleared his throat.

"Months ago," he said, "I wronged you —"

"Ah, I remember you," said The Man quickly. "I am a detective and I never forget a man's face."

He dropped his hand on Joshua's shoulder. "You are under arrest for highway robbery."

CLIMAX.

Joshua smiled happily.

OPENING THE WAY FOR THE DENOUEMENT AND CONCLUSION.

"That is God's will," he said, "and I will go with you gladly. But first let me return the hundred dollar bill —"

DENOUEMENT AND CONCLUSION.

"Oh that," said The Man with a laugh. "Forget it. The bill was a counterfeit."

END





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